

**Textual Analysis:** This activity is designed to make explicit the importance of *vocabulary* and *techniques* when analyzing and writing about texts.

Use the words in the box to complete this reading of *Skunk Hour*; a reading that *explores Lowell's use of religious iconography to criticise society's 'ills'*.



## ***SKUNK HOUR***

regular, decay, satirically, wry, arrogance, “in her dotage”, “the eyesores facing her shore”, images, menacing, mood, hierarchical, solitary, allusions posthumously, ineffectual, death, personification, bleaker, connotations, ‘a red fox stain’, seniority, voyeurism, cliché, nightmare, escalates, incongruous

Considered one of Lowell's greatest poems, *Skunk Hour* is more compressed and indirect than his more colloquial and novelistic style poems in *Life Studies*.

The  structure of eight six line stanzas

directs the focus of the poem and its cast of New England characters towards an increasingly  future.

The 'hermit heiress' who is '' is representative of the  of privileged society. She demolishes  because her view of the world is a  one. She and her son occupy positions of status based on wealth and religious . However, Lowell's representation of them as  figures, alone and  on an island conveys his criticism of the values of New England's echelon society. Consequently, she lives in a 'Spartan' cottage and the absent 'summer millionaire' has his 'nine-knot yawl' auctioned .

The catalogue of isolation and  continues with the referenced pollution of a  that covers "Blue Hill" and the  humour of a

‘fairy decorator’ considering marriage because ‘there is no money in his work’. It is onto this stage of hopelessness that Lowell enters the four concluding stanzas which become progressively  reflecting Lowell’s deteriorating mental condition.

and religious references permeate the poem with  of death and decay. ‘One dark night establishes the  and suggests the growing darkness of the speaker’s own mind as his  implies. It is a sordid representation of a vacuous society made explicit by the  lyrics that ‘bleats/’Love, oh careless love’. Lowell’s use of , the ‘hill’s skull’ has biblical resonances of ‘the dark night of the soul’ from St John of the Cross and the site of Christ’s crucifixion, Golgotha, the Hills of Skulls.

Moreover, Lowell’s  juxtaposition of nautical and funeral language builds tension and

unease which  in pace and imagery into the damnation of stanza six, 'my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,/as if my hand were at its throat.../I myself am hell'./nobody's here –'. The divided consciousness of madness is revealed by the objective observation of his suicidal gesture and the lines have resonances of the Devil in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

This  is invaded by a mother skunk and her kittens, themselves seemingly hellish creatures. 'They march on their soles up Main Street:/white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire/under the chalk-dry and spar spire/of the Trinitarian Church'.



In stanza seven Lowell continues playing with the  of words to introduce the ambiguous suggestion that like skunks he too is an outsider and shares with them a struggle for survival in a hypocritical world.